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Jaspers and Ortega on the Historicity of Being Human

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Abstract: Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset and German philosopher Karl Jaspers were both born in 1883, and they both maintained the position that humans are principally historical beings. Therefore, as attested by this notion itself, there are points in which their philosophy coincides. Ortega argued that human beings have no nature, only history. His argument is that history as such is human nature; what is most natural about being human is the fact of being historical and thus always having historicity. Jaspers maintained the same position that in contemplating historicity, one's focus should not be on human nature in the strictly hereditary sense, because it is one's traditions, not the genetic makeup, that most make one to be human. Jaspers emphasizes the conversion of an existential historic consciousness into a consciousness of historicity that is similar to what can be understood in Ortega as historical perspectivism imbued with pragmatism.

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; Ortega y Gasset, José; philosophy of history; philosophy of historiography; continental philosophy; Iberian philosophy; history; historiography.

The Spanish Philosopher José Ortega y Gasset and the German Philosopher Karl Jaspers were born in the same year, and they both maintained the position that humans are historical beings. Therefore, as attested by this notion, there are points in which their philosophy coincides.

Their overlapping notions of historicity can be summarized in terms of sharing the following key defining features. First, a human being is not comprised of solely nature in the strict biological sense of the term; rather, what humans have is history. Second, this leads to the presumption of the lack of static and fixed defining human attributes; as historicity is in constant flux since it exists in time. Third, this then means that human existence occurs in an incessantly flowing continuum that has historical determinacy, since humans are at any given time embedded in a historical moment. The fourth shared feature is that this historical determinacy

implies that humans are existing, and live in limited freedom as a self that must navigate its way through concrete, temporal, historical circumstances. This is captured here in what can be considered historical perspectivism, a concept that is used in a similar way by both philosophers.

There is an important dialogue and analysis to be considered here that adds to the thoughtful scholarship on the metaphysics of humankind as historical beings, as well as on the philosophy of history and historiography. Most succinctly defined, history is the study of past events, and historiography is the subsequent interpretation we make of that data in the writing of history. As historical beings, philosophizing on the study, recording, and writing of history is therefore crucial to better understanding human experience and existence.

Historical and Biographical Backgrounds

When Ortega y Gasset was fifteen years old, he witnessed an event that would have a particularly important impact on his philosophical thought as well as on the history of his country that ensued: in 1898, Spain lost its last vestiges of an illustrious past of wealth and global dominance when the Americans swiftly won the Spanish-American War (with armed conflict lasting just a few months). This resulted in the loss of Cuba and the Philippines, the last territories of the Spanish empire. The resulting damage to the overall National identity of the Spanish people was one factor among many that left the nation open to many of the perilous trends that would arise in the first half of the twentieth century, such as, for example, the most devastating events taking place during the Spanish Civil War from 1936-1939. It ended with the rise of one other of these disastrous trends of the early twentieth century, namely fascism, with the rule of dictator Francisco Franco, who would remain as the head of the nation until his death in 1975. These directions, among others, were of course deeply troubling to Ortega, who due to these events had spent a significant period of his life abroad (most significantly, in Argentina as well as in Germany).

After the Spanish-American War, Spain was acutely divided on how to heal the damaged spirit and restore national confidence. A group of renowned artists and intellectuals formed at the end of the nineteenth century, appropriately termed *Generación del '98*, who were concerned with how to best direct the future of the country. A main division that arose within the Generation of '98 was between the *hispanizantes* and *européizantes*. The former group was comprised of those who saw the solution to Spain's problems in looking back to tradition and by means of Hispanicizing their country to further shed foreign influence. The latter group included those who were looking ahead to other, more advanced, European nations of the time as models. Ortega was a *européizante*, part of the group that aspired to make Spain more European, and for him it was clear which advanced model he thought Spain should aspire to: Germany. He sought to immerse himself in German culture; hence, in 1905 he visited the University of Leipzig, where he spent eight months. He returned to Germany after having passed a summer back in Madrid in order to spend a year at the University of Berlin and then another six months at the University of Marburg. It was in Marburg where he became especially influenced by

neo-Kantianism, and where his intellectual path now begins to more closely parallel with the one of Karl Jaspers. Particularly important for this study, Neo-Kantianism incorporated historical elements into the philosophical discourse of the time. Moreover, both Jaspers and Ortega owe indebtedness for their notions of historicity to Wilhelm Dilthey, another case in point that lends credence to their overlapping philosophies. In Germany, Neo-Kantianism began to dominate the intellectual climate especially during the First World War and then continued on during the Weimar Republic.

Humans Have No Nature, Only History

The first noted way to conceive of this shared notion between Jaspers and Ortega of viewing humankind as historical beings is through the denial of nature's ontological foundation, in the strictly biological sense, and to replace it instead with history.

Jaspers declares: "Compared with nature, which is alien to me, history is the existence of my own essence."¹ Moreover, if the broadest notion of history is simply applied as being past time, this would include apart from other elements of the past also the biological notion of heredity. "Hence man alone has a history, that is, he does not live only by his biological heritage but also by tradition. Man's life is not merely a natural process,"² claims Jaspers. In this conception tradition is a central part of a human's historicity. "It is not heredity that makes us human," he maintains "but always the content of tradition."³ This relates to his notion of *Existenz*, and the idea of humans not just as existence but as existing, as a *gerund* – there is possibility, choice, potential – certainly this is an effective way to cope with the dismal times both philosophers lived in. Indeed, humans have choice, but can never start fully afresh, and so history is always carried along. Humans never cease being historical, though as historical agents we

¹ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy, 3 Volumes*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1971, here Volume 3, p. 161. [Henceforth cited as *P* with volume number]

² Karl Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom*, transl. Ralph Manheim, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1954, p. 66. [Henceforth cited as *WW*]

³ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, transl. Michael Bullock, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1953, p. 236. [Henceforth cited as *OGH*]

may re-interpret our potentials that have been shaped by the past: "Life is a gerundive,"⁴ declares Ortega. Humankind makes itself as an "infinitely plastic entity... to be as you like" he additionally declares (*HS* 203-4). Humans are not wedged in a state of fixed being. "History," argues Ortega, "is the reality of man. He has no other. Through history he has made himself such as he is. To deny the past is foolish and illusory for the past is man's nature" (*HS* 61-2).

As historical beings, humans must never forget their past. This insight was particularly relevant regarding the two philosopher's own time. Jaspers writes: "there is one great anxiety: The world is pervaded by terrible forgetfulness."⁵ Certainly, the appearance of forward-focused totalitarian leaders resolved to destroy tradition and erase parts of history warranted this concern. Mussolini, for example, was also born in 1883, the same year as Jaspers and Ortega. "No reality is more essential to our self-awareness than history" states Jaspers (*WW* 96).

History is the Ever-Flowing Progression of Time

History is the constant, ever-flowing progression of time. Jaspers writes:

Historicity is objectively and subjectively the absolute unrest caused by the instability of things in time. It is not the mere passing of things which we observe in processes of nature. Historicity relates the present to the past and to the future so as to penetrate mere temporality in continuous communication. [*P2* 342]

Historicity exists as a continuum in which the present is made up of events from the past, so the present is the past, and the past is present—as well as being the potential future. The same understanding of historicity as a continuum is also present in Ortega. This becomes apparent by Ortega's emphasis on how a human's being progresses in the sense of a constant process of becoming a self:

The experiments already made with life narrow man's future. If we do now know what he is going to be, we know what he is not going to be. Man lives in view of the past. *Man, in a word, has no nature; what he has is history...* Now concerning man it must be said, not only that his being is variable, but also that his being grows and, in this sense, that it progresses. [*HS* 217-8]

Hence Ortega's frequent, albeit commonplace, plea that "we have a need of history in its entirety, not to fall back into, but to see if we can escape from it."⁶ This possible future applicability of lessons from the past is one of the ways in which this account connects to pragmatism. Historical facts are corroborated over time and remain interesting, meaningful, and useful in the future as they continue being tested in and for the present. John Dewey defines this corroboration as "historical empiricism."⁷ There is no beginning and no end for the historical universe. Jaspers describes the passage of history as follows:

What in historical cognition is thus ultimately nothing but change within universal transience, change in causal relations of effect and aftereffect, an endless up and down in random diversity without beginning or end—this, to Existenz, is historic existence: not mere evanescence, but a listening to the past as well as the language of a possible future. It is the present as a coalescence of past and future into the *substantial Now*. [*P2* 348]

The intelligible historical field must be viewed as part of a continuum, argues Ortega, which

when it is a partial reality, does not end in itself, but continues in another thing, and to begin by isolating it is to run the risk of cutting it off, leaving outside what is perhaps its most important part.⁸

⁴ José Ortega y Gasset, *History as a System*, New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company 1961, 61-2. [Henceforth cited as *HS*]

⁵ Karl Jaspers, "Vom Europäischen Geist (1946)," in *Rechenschaft und Ausblick*, Munich, DE: Piper & Co Verlag 1951, pp. 233-64, here p. 261. Cited and transl. John Hennig, "Jaspers' Attitude Towards History," in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp, Carbondale, IL: Open Court Publishing Company 1981, pp. 565-91, here p. 587.

⁶ José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Company 1932, p. 96. [Henceforth cited as *RM*] It is noted in this edition, "This translation, authorized by Sr. Ortega y Gasset, remains anonymous at the translator's request."

⁷ John Dewey, "The Structure of Experience," in *The Philosophy of John Dewey: Two Volumes in One*, ed. John J. McDermott, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1981, pp. 1-354, here p. 50.

⁸ José Ortega y Gasset, *An Interpretation of Universal History*, transl. Mildred Adams, New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company 1975, p. 65. [Henceforth referred to as *IUH*]

The Historical Determinacy of the Continuum of Human Beings

The continuum itself is the most important variable Ortega refers to, as this is one's foundation for being, which is continuously in a process of becoming. A similar perspective can be found in Jaspers:

Existence is historic because it defies completion in time, because it is restlessly self-generating, because it is never in a state of harmony. Its anatomical features demand that we change – a challenge that does not cease in temporal existence. [P2 221]

Human nature is, hence, historical change. In a similar way, Ortega argues:

Human life is thus not an entity that changes accidentally, rather the reverse: in it the "substance" is precisely change, which means that it cannot be thought of Eleatically as substance. [HS 205]

The reference here is to Parmenides and Zeno's belief in the unity of being. For Ortega, the historicity of humans is defined as the interconnectedness of self and circumstance being embedded in a temporal chain of constant change.

As we have seen, the past speaks to human beings; the future cannot do so – despite one's forward-looking tendencies. Humans exist as part of a continuum of past-present-future. Existence is reflexive. Human existence has historical determinacy as always beings embedded in a historical moment and within concrete, specific historical circumstances, as Jaspers explains: "Being phenomenal, unconditional action is temporally defined and thus historically concrete" (P2 288). For Ortega, reason arises from human life, and as human beings are historical existences that are always embedded in historical circumstances, historical reason is, therefore, central for understanding: "To comprehend anything human, be it personal or collective, one must tell its history...Life only takes on a measure of transparency in the light of *historical reason*" (HS 214).

Historical Determinacy as the Radical Reality of Self and Circumstance

For Ortega, historical determinacy exists as self and circumstance: "I am myself plus my circumstance, and if I do not save it, I cannot save myself."⁹ This is the radical

reality of humans: a self has to navigate through the waves of historical circumstances. Ortega often uses the image of being shipwrecked; one constantly needs to steer oneself and this creates insecurities and anxiety – these are very existentialist themes indeed. One must constantly decide what to do, and which identity to assume, and this always occurs in a context of specific and limiting, historical circumstances. Jaspers expresses a similar idea: "I come to exist by participating in my active world...I do not exist without the world" (P2 45). As Ortega presupposes the reality of the past and a radical reality of humans as being self and circumstance, an insistence on representative realism can be noticed. In this context, history is understood broadly as not just one's own specific past, but all the past that has come prior to a given life. Humans are nothing without their histories; as Ortega argues, "experience of life is not made up solely of my past, of the experiences that I personally have had. It is built up also of the past of my forebears, handed down to me by the society I live in" (HS 210).

As I have mentioned above, Jaspers similarly finds human traditions to be the most distinct variable for being human. His view stresses in a universalizing manner the objective of achieving true unity via an existential historic consciousness. Likewise, also Ortega clearly shared this emphasis on tradition, as he argues: "Man is never the first man but begins his life on a certain level of accumulated past" (HS 81). Ortega often asserts that human beings are not things but dramas – this can also be seen in the anxiety that is caused through finding oneself in a situation comparable to being shipwrecked. In this drama, humans must live authentically. The first steps humans take in working toward living authentically are influenced by the interpretations one makes of the surrounding circumstances of one's time that lead to the creation of a system of convictions that add to defining the historical spirit of the time. The more authentically humans live, Ortega argues, the more authentic are the predictions about the future, for humans live in the passing of generations in constant prophecy.¹⁰ This is a key variable of Ortega's methodology for historiography; historical study involves, in part, finding these moments of crisis when a system of beliefs has failed, and thus it forms pivotal points in between periods of change when a

Norton & Company 1961, p. 45.

⁹ José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote*, transl. Evelyn Rugg and Diego Marín, New York, N.Y.: W. W.

¹⁰ José Ortega y Gasset, *En torno a Galileo*, Madrid, ES: Biblioteca Nueva 2005, p. 185. [Henceforth cited as TG].

society is left without a stable world. By reflecting upon the world during such unstable times a state of negative convictions is present, as humans always have some sort of convictions. Stabilization sets in by developing new convictions. The same process may apply to an individual.

Historical determinacy refers to the fact that humans are always being embedded in a historical moment, yet this does not mean that they have no free will. Jaspers describes this situation as the first boundary situation, namely

in existence I am always in a particular situation...I exist in certain social circumstances at a certain time in history; I am a man or a woman, young or old, directed by opportunities and chances. The boundary situation of being subject to the singular constraint of my data derives its poignancy from the contrasting thought of man at large and of his due in any state of perfection... The unrest in this boundary situation is that what is up to me lies still ahead; my freedom in it is to assume given facts, to make them my own as if they had been my will. [P2 183-4]

Limit situations, often also translated as border or boundary situations, awaken us through the questioning of these significant moments. This is arguably comparable to Ortega's notion of those pivotal moments of crises in history when new ideas that occur in a generation or in an individual are being converted into beliefs that are intrinsic to that generation or individual. In Ortega's philosophy, humans coexist with their beliefs; and essentially exist within them. One may take beliefs for granted. Until moments of crisis occur, beliefs can be so ingrained that the individual never questions them. In Ortega's view, most beliefs have been inherited by previous generations. One experiences doubts about one's existence, and ideas arise to fill in the thus arisen gaps, which may later convert into beliefs—and so the process repeats itself. This cycle of changing beliefs is clearly revealed in history.

Historical consciousness, or one's ability to observe and learn about past events, as Jaspers defines it, may or may not relate to personal lives—until, that is, one possesses a consciousness of one's historicity that is part of *Existenz*; or, in other words, that is part of how one understands and exists within this knowledge of present times as a continuation of a past that has been lived by previous existences. For Jaspers, in the existential historic consciousness

the self becomes aware of its *historicity* as the only reality it has. The historic consciousness of *Existenz* must be personal in origin. It makes me aware of myself in communication with other historic self-being; I as myself am phenomenally bound in time to a sequence of singular situations, my given situation. [P2 104-5]

This is comparable to the cornerstone of Ortega's philosophy of the radical reality being self and circumstance, in contrast to this Jaspers' emphasis is primarily on human circumstances. In part, Jaspers' *Existenz* is an individual recording of changing circumstances. The past does not condition one to walk entirely determined paths; rather, one can accept or not accept details about the past as being relevant for present and future—this constitutes another connection to pragmatism.

Historical Perspectivism

The access to this radical reality can be found in the concept of historical perspectivism. Jaspers' historical consciousness refers to the consciousness of an individual's present historical circumstances, or in his words, "*This unity of myself with my existence as a phenomenon is my historicity and awareness of it is historic consciousness*" (P2 121). In other words, there are two steps in this process of unification. First, by being aware of the present historical situation one can learn from the past, but this does not yet imply a connection to one's personal life—one only has historical consciousness. In the second step, by making this personal connection, a consciousness of one's historicity is being gained. This conversion forms epistemological and metaphysical foundations for the interpretation of one's circumstance and of humans, at any given time. In it, the unique historical moment and one's individual place can be recognized. While this recognition is relative to an individual, it does provide epistemological progress and a metaphysical structural framework for the interpretation of historical reality. History does not produce the self; history is within the self—hence why the different perspectives of different selves open the window wider into deeper understanding of individual and collective existence.

Perspectivism is another cornerstone of Ortega's philosophy, yet this view that reality is being perceived from one's own point of view is not meant to be solipsistic but rather is indicative of representative realism. Again, a similar stance is found in Jaspers who also strived to

overcome the trappings of a strict relativism. In fact, it is the gathering of perspectives embedded in a historical epoch that should be the focus of historical study; the more historical details are being collected, the more one can see through the window of historical reality. All warranted assertions of knowledge are perceptions that are embedded in a specific time and space. Ortega's perspectivism reveals that it is not that one proclaimed truth is true or false; rather there are multiple truths and falsities, and the one falsity is to say that there is only one truth, just as it is false to say that there is only one perspective; things cannot be truthful nor false, and what is false is so on the grounds of the judgment made that something is true or false.¹¹

It is unlikely to capture a complete picture of complex matters in one perspective only. Thus, it is necessary to gather several perspectives, and by doing so the window into understanding human reality indeed opens up—like pieces of a puzzle—and with it the more strongly warranted become assertions in human history and historiography. Historians and historiographers must indeed focus on capturing and preserving perspectives of the present times as well as on ones looking back in time. History books also provide some data about the time they were prepared, published, and continued being in circulation, along with the contents in and of themselves. A history of Ancient Rome was interpreted and subsequently written very differently in the Enlightenment as opposed to a present-time one, for example, so some of the historical time of the publication can be captured by considering the different interpretative recordings in a pragmatist sense. One should also explore more of why those specific details or focuses were interesting, useful, and meaningful to record at the time, and, therefore, examine what they might tell one about that time of interpreting, writing, publishing, and continued circulation. Thus, a text on ancient Rome written in the Enlightenment can also provide information about what was useful, interesting, and meaningful for the writer and audience in the Enlightenment at the time it was being written and published, along with the

content provided about the history of ancient Rome. Contemporary knowledge indeed exists in a historical form for one is always limited not only by what may be interesting, meaningful, and useful in a pragmatist sense, at any particular moment, and among specific limiting circumstances, individually or as a society, but also by the tools available for interpretation, understanding, and recording in a given historical moment.

Ortega has strong pragmatist elements in his philosophy, despite his fervent rejection of the North American philosophical tradition. Arguably, there is some pragmatist philosophy in Jaspers as well. Jaspers argues for instance: "History is seen in hierarchies of values, in its origins, in its crucial stages. The real is divided up into the essential and the inessential" (*OGH* 262). Hierarchies of values are, in part, pragmatically determined. Moreover, as "historical beings," it is noteworthy that both Jaspers and Ortega came to age between one and two generations after the first major American Pragmatists: Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. Thus, both Jaspers and Ortega had been formally educated as adults at a time when key pragmatists texts already had been in circulation. Although the initial acceptance of pragmatism was weak in Europe, nonetheless it did have a presence. For example, during the 1920s Julius Goldstein at the University of Darmstadt, was one of the early defenders of American pragmatism in Germany. James, in fact, kept frequent correspondence with Goldstein, hoping to inspire more pragmatist thought in Germany. And in Spain, Dewey's works were first translated by students of Ortega.

Whereas one might not be able to discern when pragmatic focuses in history describe an objective historical reality, this is an accepted practice in the pragmatist tradition, and this lack of discernment nonetheless is acceptable by virtue of the insights gained from historical events—this provides valuable knowledge about humans as historical beings and about humankind as historical entities. The pragmatist dialogue has much to contribute to discussions on epistemological possibility and the metaphysics of humankind as being a historical event. What can be considered interesting, meaningful, and useful needs to be attested over time, therefore part of the methodology of pragmatism stems from the past. The selection of historical details for analysis, recording and subsequent writing are largely pragmatically determined. As historical beings,

¹¹ Ortega emphasizes this point in many instances within his writings. For example he writes, "reality, like a landscape, has infinite perspectives, all of which are equally true and authentic. The only false perspective is the one that assumes to be the only one" (my translation). José Ortega y Gasset, *El tema de nuestro tiempo*, Madrid, ES: Alianza Editorial 2006, p. 149.

historical consciousness that leads to a consciousness of historicity can be pragmatically understood as being largely shaped by how elements that are being preserved must make a practical, useful, and meaningful difference in the life of humans, and at least some of the rest that is not preserved is being ignored, consciously or not.

The systematic quality of Ortega's "historical perspectivism" can be understood through his theory of generations. In Ortega's philosophy, historical reality is determined by the divisions of generations, specifically defined in groups of fifteen-year increments, with particular influence attributed to the two generations between the ages of thirty-to-sixty. "Each generation represents an essential piece, un-transferable and unrepairable, of historical time, of the vital trajectory of humankind," and "Every human generation carries within itself all the previous generations and as such, it is a perspective of universal history" (*TG* 93-4, my translation). The generation one belongs to is critical (because as historical beings, humans can share proximity in time and date). Ortega argues that people of the same generation, yet of different cultures are more similar than those of different generations that share the same culture. This is represented in the Spanish terms *coetáneo* (coeval or coetaneous) and *contemporáneo* (contemporary), the former referring to being of the same age, and the latter referring to being of the same historical time period. A generational group is a projection of a set of perspectives that provide a window into historical reality and knowledge—especially if captured in the present moment, given the afore-mentioned important pragmatist framework to consider. Jaspers endorses a similar idea: "A few generations cohere in typical stylistic sequences or developments of thought, from their origin to their disintegration" (*OGH* 255).

The concept of truth can be replaced with what should be more properly termed "a warranted historical fact," if one borrows from Dewey the notion of warranted assertions, in order to employ the ensuing method into a pragmatist philosophy of history. James offers a summary of the pragmatist methodology:

What difference would it practically make to anyone if this [any] notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically

the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right.¹²

This notion could also very well be any historical assertion.

Conclusion

As historical beings, studying history is indispensable for epistemology, metaphysics, ethics—any cognitive event that is related to human life thus has a human history. Humans are historical beings. Historians and historiographers must work to avoid the trappings of the lure of storytelling that may lead to a wider audience, but at the expense of historical accuracy when the focus shifts to the way in which the story is told rather than by paying attention to the actual contents. The concepts of history and story are indeed different; the former aims to refer to objective events, whereas the latter refers to subjective events. Thus, history is not mere storytelling; one must avoid, as Jaspers argues, studying history in a way "that merely thrills, and from a mythicizing historiography that consciously produces an intentional and therefore untrue history" (*P3* 160). This is also why unearthing the pragmatist elements in Jaspers' and Ortega's philosophy of history and historiography is valuable, since a pragmatist view provides an additional layer of historical knowledge about humans as historical beings. Ortega also commands that "this admirable vocation called 'history' can now stop being mere story-telling or, at best, excellent technique—admirable, necessary, highly respected but mere technique—and become true science."¹³ As Jaspers further similarly states: "History will cease to be a mere field of knowledge, and become once again a question of the consciousness of life and of existence; it will cease to be an affair of aesthetic culture, and become the earnestness of hearing and response" (*OGH* 266). Indeed, history is a vital source for further knowledge about human experiences and existences.

¹² William James, *Pragmatism*, New York, NY: Dover Publications 1995, p. 18.

¹³ José Ortega y Gasset, *Historical Reason*, transl. Philip W. Silver, New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company 1984, p. 49